Williamstown May 10. 1848.

B. F. Langdon Esq

Dr Sir,

Your letter of the 3d inst. came duly to hand, & I embrace my earliest leisure to reply. And yet I feel some reluctance to express opinions on such a subject, in such circumstances, to be made use of among the members of a church, many of whom, I have a right to conclude, from your statements, are both excited & committed on different sides of the controversy involving the points at issue. As I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, nor that of the members of your church or their Pastor, I know not to whom I am writing, & am ignorant of the local or personal interests which may be affected beneficially, or otherwise, by what I may say; & the wisdom of Solomon has admonished us that "He that judgeth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly & a shame unto him." I am not certain that I have so heard the matter in dispute in your church, as to be authorized to judge or to express any opinion respecting it. I may speak, it is true, to the abstract question of the right of a church; but in the hands of interested parties, I fear my opinions would soon become concrete, & that too with the relations & bearings, which I might regret. I should write therefore with more freedom & satisfaction, if I knew all the circumstances & causes of the long-cherished differences of opinion, which you say exist in your church. But as it is, I must speak only to the abstract question & the general circumstances which you have named, expecting, if you make any use of my letter, that you will know the whole of it, & let the members of your church be assured that I disclaim all right, at this distance from the scenes in which you are involved, to express opinions which should have the least weight to sway or affect the decisions of neighboring brethren, to whom your differences may be submitted for counsel, in view of all the local & personal bearings of the questions you have propounded.

You ask: "Has a church the right or power, by the

vote of a majority, to compel its members to pay any particular sum, or to adopt any particular mode for the support of its ministry, under the pains of censure or excommunication? Or, has not each member of the church a gospel right to judge of his own means or ability to support the ministry, without any supervision of the church, unless the sum contributed amounts to covetousness?" And again, "can a subject, which does not involve the essentials of christianity, warrantably be a ground of exclusion?"

My opinions on the general principles involved in these questions, are the following.

A church is a body corporate & social, formed by the voluntary consent of its members, under the sanction of divine authority, to observe the institutions of the gospel & to worship God in a social way; & in all this, to "bear one another's burdens, & so fulfill the law of christ."

One of the institutions of the gospel, of the highest importance, is the christian ministry. It is the duty, therefore, of every church to have a minister. And, inasmuch as "he that serves the altar must live of the altar", it is the duty of every church to support its minister. ~~But if it is~~ Every one who joins a church should understand this, that it will be a part of his religious duty to pay his just proportion of the support of the chosen minister of the church. This is involved in the covenant which he makes with his brethren. It is a solemn engagement on his part & on their part, that they will stand together in this matter, as in all others that pertain to life & godliness.

But if it is the duty of the members of a church, thus constituted, to support a minister, it is their duty to agree to do so, when they call a minister, & to pledge themselves to their minister to that effect. This is generally done, as it should be, by the church acting as a social & responsible body. They make out their call to their minister by vote of the majority, & the minority, as in duty bound, submit & yield their preferences. In the same manner the church votes to pay the stipulated salary for the minister's support. This is communicated to him by a committee of the church, & on the faith of this engagement, the

minister accepts the call. Here then is a contract between the minister on the one hand, & the church, as a body — (not the individual members separately — but the church) on the other. This contract is thus binding on this social body, the church, & every member of the church is bound by his covenant of church membership, to bear his part of the burden of all such contracts. But how is the church to fulfill this contract? If every member may pay just what he pleases, & adopt his own mode of paying, without concert with his brethren, & without regard to any rule of apportionment, there may be a great deficiency in the sum total. Who, then, shall foot the bill? And how shall the church be just? If no member is bound by the rules & votes of the body, how is the body bound? And yet this is a contract, to the fulfilment of which the church is bound, socially, morally & legally, as much as a Rail-Road company is bound, as such, to pay the wages of its contractors from the common stock of the share-holders. It is true that the members of a church, (with such aid as is usually furnished by the congregation) may, if they are well disposed & liberal-spirited, contribute enough, by subscriptions purely voluntary, to provide for the minister's support, according to contract. When this is done, it is well. It answers the ends of justice & honesty, on the part of the church, & no one has a right to complain. It is indeed commendable for a church thus to support its minister, by the free-will offerings of the members, provided they do not, by adopting this voluntary method, cherish & inculcate the impression, that, in contributing thus freely, they are <u>charitably giving</u>, instead of <u>justly paying</u> their proportion of the minister's salary; & provided the church is sure that the amount to be raised in this way will be sufficient to fulfil its engagement. But if a deficiency occurs, after trial in this way

to raise the ministers promised support, & the voluntary subscriptions of the members are found to be inadequate, then it is not only the right, but the duty of the church, in its body corporate, to take this matter in hand by vote, fix upon some equitable rule of apportionment, & require every member, according to his ability, in the judgment of his brethren, to pay his share of the ministers salary. The principles of common honesty demand this. How else can the church fulfill its engagements & discharge the obligations of justice? If the church has power to make a contract by vote, it surely has the power, by vote, to ensure the fulfilment of that contract. But how shall this be done, if the church has no right, by equitable rules of apportionment, to require each member to pay his share of the common debt.

If any member is agrieved or oppressed, by the rule adopted by the church for this purpose, he has his remedy, according to congregational usage, in a mutual council. I would here remark that the "grand list" does not seem to me a just & equitable rule, for regulating the payments of church members for the support of religious worship. It may operate unjustly, or it may not. Of this every church must judge, & see to it that the rule adopted shall be equitable. But the individual members must not take this thing into their own hands, separately, & thus destroy the power of the church to fulfil its engagements. It is a breach of their covenant, to do so. They are bound to act together, & if they do not recognize this obligation, & act upon it, they either impose unjust burdens upon others, more faithful than themselves, or they subject the church to the reproach of dishonesty in respect to its contracts. And I see not why the resistance of any member to these just & necessary measures, for maintaining the integrity & justice of the church,

should not subject him to censure, & even to excommunication, if he persist in his refusal to bear his part, on equitable principles, in the support of religious worship, according to the engagements of the church.

The fact, that there exists in your place a "Church Society," for the support of the ministry, with which a portion of the members of the church are incorporated, does not, in my view, change the obligations of the remaining members to do their part according to the rule adopted by vote of the church. If the Society spoken of is approved by the church, as the best arrangement for receiving the cöoperation of others in the support of religious worship, as I presume it is, then it would be well for all the members of the church to be members of that Society, & thus, by taking common ground in this respect, invite the cöoperation of the non-professing community, who are willing to bear their part, with the church, in supporting the institutions of religion. But if any choose not to join the Society, & subject themselves to its rules of payment, this does not surely change their covenant obligation to bear their part with their brethren who belong to the Society & others, in making up the amount, not provided for by the Society, & necessary to enable the church to fulfil its engagements.

It is invain to say, that these obligations do not belong to "the essentials of Christianity." Surely Christianity requires both individuals & churches to "provide things honest in the sight of all men;" & inculcates the doctrine, that "it is better not to vow, than to vow & not pay." And I can see no propriety in restricting the ~~discipline~~ "supervision of the church" in respect to pecuniary contributions, to "simple" matters of "conscientiousness." Dishonesty & injustice are breaches

of Christian duty, as palpable as covetousness, & as censurable. Besides, what motive is more likely to be concerned, than covetousness, in inducing the refusal of a church member to submit to the votes of the church, in respect to the fulfilment of pecuniary engagements? The injustice of this refusal has respect to pecuniary obligations alone. The payment of money is the question, & the temptation to this injustice is most likely to be covetousness. If the one, therefore, is a proper subject for the supervision or discipline of the church, the other is; for they are linked togeth, as cause & effect, & the one implies the other.

On the whole, therefore, I am clearly of the opinion, that it is the right & duty of every church to exercise supervision & discipline over it members, in respect to the amount of their payments for the support of religious worship & instruction, in such form & order as the church covenant implies, & that the members should consider themselves bound in duty to submit to the votes of a majority of the church, in this, as in all other things, pertaining to the obligations & duties of the church in its corporate capacity. How far discipline in the way of formal censure, should be actually applied, in such cases, must of course depend on circumstances.

I need make no apology for the frank expression of these opinions; for you have asked me. I have written in great haste, & must send you my first draft, in a crude form, because I have no time to rewrite & correct it. I trust

it will be intelligible; & if it shall be of any avail in harmonizing the views of the church on these subjects, my prayers & wishes will be so far answered. I commend you & the church of God & the word of his grace, & am very truly Rev. & yours, in the service of Christ, Very respectfully & affectionately

Absalom Peters.

P.S. I presume though I do not know, that I am writing to a Son of the late Hon. C. Langdon, whom I well knew. If so, accept of the expression of my esteem for your Father's sake, as well as for the interest you manifest in the well-being of the church to which you are member.

Yours & A.P.

B. F. Langdon Esq.

Castleton

Vermont